

# FRAKTUR: Words into Pictures

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

It means “fractured,” as in broken lettering, but *fraktur* is considered one of the most distinctive—and in its own way, creative and beautiful—of the American folk arts. The term describes the distinctive style of lettering and decoration on documents related to the rites of passage of early Pennsylvania German settlers. They documented their births, baptisms, and graduations with these hand-drawn, decorative certificates and created enchanting works of art from Scripture, house blessings, and words of wisdom.

*Fraktur* flourished in Pennsylvania from about 1740 to 1850, created by German-speaking Protestant groups including the Amish, Mennonites, Lutherans, members of the Reformed Church of Zurich, and smaller sects such as the Schwenkfelders.

“Rather than being uniquely American—which might be considered a valuable quality in other folk art—*fraktur* has long roots in the Germanic heritage of its makers,” notes Candace Perry, curator of the Schwenkfelder Library and Heritage Center in Pennsylvania. “*Fraktur* writing was tied to traditions in German-speaking Europe, a thread from the old country to the new that would continue even when the artists were several generations removed from their immigrant ancestors.”

*Fraktur* artists were a diverse group. Because the role of maintaining personal and family records in the new





Drawing with religious text, 1806, attributed to David Kriebel (1787-1848), Gwynedd Township, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. From the permanent collection of the Schwenkfelder Library and Heritage Center.

**OPPOSITE:**

Scholars believe John Van Minian (active 1791-1835) drew this lady in profile between 1820 and 1835 in either Berks or Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, or Baltimore County, Maryland. Works attributed to him display carefully ruled sections with figures of men or women, highly stylized floral designs, and text in English or German. Courtesy of the American Folk Art Museum, promised gift of Ralph Esmerian.

land fell to individuals and not to institutions, a commemorative fraktur might be drawn and painted by anyone from a skilled calligrapher to an untrained child.

David Barquist, curator of American Decorative Arts at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, explains: "I would say fraktur are significant as a continuation in America of the centuries-old European tradition of illumination, one that allowed the Germans in Pennsylvania to celebrate and preserve their language and heritage in a private and personal way, even as they adapted in other ways to the majority English-speaking culture around them. Fraktur are wonderful expressions of the faith, the creativity, and sometimes the whimsy of their makers."

With the movement of German-speaking settlers, fraktur eventually spread to New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas,

Ohio, and Indiana, and north into Ontario. But its heaviest concentration remained in southeastern Pennsylvania. Over time, the printing press became the purveyor of all manner of certificates, relegating the beautifully hand-drawn, hand-painted lettering and decoration of the fraktur to the status of relic—although one now highly valued.

**MODERN FRAKTUR ARTISTS**

Today original fraktur is sought after as historic folk art, and an example found in an antiques store or at auction is a prize indeed. Several modern artists have continued the tradition of fraktur, creating true works of art that are both historically informed and decorative.

We talked to three of today's most esteemed American fraktur artists, whose consistent quality and keen attention to craftsmanship have repeatedly earned them listings in the juried *Early American Life* Directory of Traditional American Crafts®. Each first encountered fraktur several years ago and can still remember with clarity that single, seminal moment. All three say they owe a considerable debt to the authentic fraktur that serves as a source of intense inspiration. Yet when it comes to interpreting the form, each has taken a different path.

Susan Daul of Matthews, North Carolina, creates bold and bright fraktur that captures the essence of traditional fraktur in a contemporary context. Fred Peltier of Ardmore, Pennsylvania, is a purist in his use of vintage materials while also decorating his pieces with original and playful images from his fertile imagination. Marta Urban of Union, Pennsylvania, loves the fraktur wording—to which she remains completely true—embellishing it with creative imagery in more muted tones. All three produce one-of-a-kind pieces of art.

**SUSAN SOLOWAY DAUL**

Since she was a child, Susan Soloway Daul loved to draw birds and animals—painting them, sculpting them, and carving them to her heart's content. Then one day she saw a fraktur. "I remember the exact moment, twenty-one years ago," she says. "I'd been involved with all of



Susan Daul's fraktur is characterized by bold colors, original imagery—birds figure prominently—and words of her own choosing. The sentiment above reads: "Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice saying I will try again tomorrow." The fraktur at the top notes: "We do not great things we do only small things with great love." Both are set off by grain-painted frames.

these other art forms, but when I saw that fraktur I knew immediately that this was what I liked best. Right away I loved the use of birds and animals, the inspirational words, and the beautiful combinations of color."

Two decades later, Daul is in the top echelon of contemporary American fraktur artists. Her creations have won awards, are sold in fine museums and shops around the country, and have been featured in numerous magazine articles. But it didn't happen

overnight. As with many of the other artists now creating fraktur, her early efforts were gifts for family and friends. "Eventually, it progressed into a business that's managed to pay college tuition for our three children," she says, noting that she's been producing fraktur in earnest for eight years now.

Daul's creations are distinctive in her bold use of color, detailed draftsmanship, and period framing. Her imagery is quite intricate, and emphasizes, of course, birds and animals and flowers. "My style for my other artwork has always been very realistic, but my fraktur is a step away, more stylized," she says. "I love to examine the genuine old ones. A lot of inspiration comes to me when I look at the symmetry and the beautifully ornamented lettering of an old fraktur. I'm absolutely passionate about the original pieces."

Although her own creations are inspired by antique fraktur, she does not produce literal copies. "Mine are historically inspired, but I always change them in some way to make them my own. It's a beautiful way to share words and sentiments that I've found to be personally inspirational. Sometimes I do more primitive pieces—the kind that are especially pleasing to me personally—then I'll do some that may have a newer look and appeal more to the person who's never seen fraktur before."

Daul delicately ages her paper and frames her work in either handmade-and-grained frames from a supplier or in antique frames that are still in good shape.

Daul's fraktur creations have been displayed at the American Folk Art Museum in New York and have earned Best of Show honors at the Mount Vernon Crafts Fair. North Carolina's Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts commissioned her to create special fraktur, and her art can be found in the shops at Colonial Williamsburg, the American Folk Art Museum, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In 2002 she produced the artwork for the popular *Fraktur from the Heart* calendar.

"I do a lot of custom work, pieces for marriages, house blessings, and anniversaries," she says, explaining

that she sometimes uses birds to signify years, such as forty birds, one for each year of a marriage.

Daul sells both original creations and limited-edition prints. Prices for her original pieces range from about \$300 to about \$1,500, based on size, design intricacy, and time involved. Prints start at about \$70.

"I'm always doing new ones," she confesses. "I don't seem to be able to stop because it's just so fulfilling."

## FRED PELTIER

Fred Peltier's breakthrough as a fraktur artist came several years ago when he realized he didn't need to create perfect reproductions of the historic documents but was free to inject his own creativity into the art form. Today Peltier's creations are a finely wrought blend of purist technique and his own playful designs, all done on vintage paper with custom-mixed colors. "My work looks like it just came off the wall of somebody's old farmhouse," he says.

Although Peltier trained as an architect, his fondness for fraktur originated during searches for Pennsylvania German folk art in his native southeastern Pennsylvania. "My wife and I would go to the antiques shops, and fraktur began to catch my eye," he recalls. "From the start I found them very pleasing in their composition, very successful."

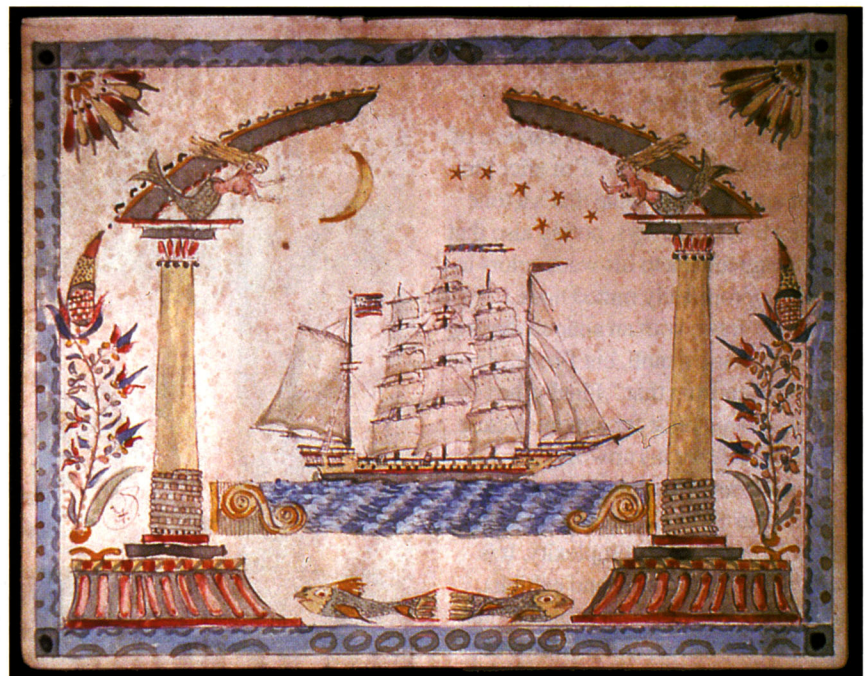
Peltier first put pen to paper to create fraktur nearly a decade ago. His first work was mostly commemorative certificates for families and friends—for births and marriages, even special certificates to honor boys in the local Boy Scout troop who had achieved the top Eagle rank.

About the same time, he attended a folk art show where some skilled fraktur artists were displaying their work. "I was shocked at the beauty and the quality of what they'd done," he says, and he talked to the artists about it. "They encouraged me to continue with my efforts, and that was very important to me."

As he kept at it—squeezing in fraktur between the hectic demands of being an architect—his artwork matured. "But the more I studied the old ones, the more I realized that mine were lacking something," he recalls.



Fred Peltier takes a free-form approach to his fraktur, relying on his own creative imagery. He preserves the look and spirit of the originals by custom mixing his colors, drawing with a dipping pen on pre-1850 paper, and using antique frames.



"They didn't seem to have the life or the flair of the old ones. So I thought about it and finally came to the conclusion that the early fraktur artists were creating them as an act of pleasure, with an artistic playfulness. Because of who they were and the conditions they worked in, their work didn't have to be perfect. But it had to come from the heart."

That was Peltier's epiphany. He began to have more fun, to take more

joy in creating fraktur, and his skill and distinctive style blossomed accordingly. Unlike some contemporary artists who reproduce the designs of old fraktur, Peltier creates his own renditions of birds, animals, flowers, angels, and whatever else strikes his fancy as suitable for a particular piece.

"I don't copy my designs out of a book," he says. "Some of the other fraktur artists are doing fabulous reproductions, but rarely will you see one of

my pieces that's the same as one in a book. The compositions are mine."

But while Peltier's compositions are his own, his technique belongs to the ages. "When I first discovered fraktur, I could imagine these artists working in very primitive environments, sitting there two hundred years ago at a wooden table and creating this beautiful artwork by candlelight," he says. "It's amazing that someone in that situation could produce something that's so pleasing."

There's much of that same spirit in Peltier himself, who traces his American roots back to the German immigrants who settled Pennsylvania in the early eighteenth century.

He constantly searches for pre-1850 paper, relying on a network of antique book dealers. "Some of the old books are in such bad shape they can't be sold, so I get them before they go into the dumpster," he says. He uses the blank pages for his art, which means many of his creations are roughly nine by eleven inches.

He carefully mixes his inks and watercolors to capture the appearance of centuries-old documents. "I'm after the look of aged ink, the sepia that's a tone off of jet black," he says, noting also that he adds ingredients to his watercolors to achieve appropriately muted hues.

And he draws with an antique dipping pen. "I don't use a quill, but I'm only one generation up from that." Finally, he hunts the countryside for antique picture frames suitable for his artwork.

Fred Peltier prices his fraktur from about \$55 to \$450, depending on size, materials, and design complexity. It is available at select shows and exhibits, and he takes custom orders for personalized birth, baptismal, and marriage certificates among other original designs.

## MARTA URBAN

The very essence of fraktur—words presented in a decorative format—first convinced Marta Urban to pursue the art form.

"My sister bought a contemporary fraktur thirty years ago," she says. "I'd had a love of lettering all my life and when I saw that one, I knew I wanted to create fraktur." One day in a local art museum she laid eyes on an eighteenth-century fraktur. "When I saw that genuine



To Marta Urban, fraktur words are key. She uses language verbatim from old fraktur, penning the original German words or translating them into English. The top verse reads: "In the wide world, I find nothing but disturbance, war and strife. In my small garden, I find love, peace, rest and unity. My flowers never fight." The bird fraktur bears the simple observation: "In Spring time, one can see many lovely tulips in the field."



Pennsylvania German illuminated manuscript and knew what the early ones looked like up close, I was truly inspired."

Like many artists, Urban had to put her inspiration on hold, raising a family and working in social services for several years. Then, in the mid-1980s, she began to pursue fraktur in earnest. She did in-depth research, first in her native western Pennsylvania before

traveling east toward Lancaster's historic Pennsylvania German country.

"The more I studied fraktur, the more I was drawn to it," she recalls. "It was beautiful, but what captured me was when I learned why they were made in the first place—not just to be artwork, but to serve as documents, even though they were created with such beauty."

Urban created her first fraktur in

1987, and today fraktur words are still of vital importance to her artwork. For the most part, she either reproduces the words verbatim from old fraktur or has them translated into English. Either way, the words themselves remain authentic.

"I stay true to the words. All of my verses are from original sources because, again, the words were the inspiration for the pieces," she says. (She will, however, pen special wording for custom orders.) She even reproduces misspellings and awkward line breaks in the old script. "Remember, some of these were created by eight-year-old girls doing the best they could. And sometimes there will even be something a little intentionally 'off' because the Pennsylvania Germans believed there was only one perfect thing in the world, and that was God."

Time and again, she emphasizes the importance of incorporating beauty into everyday objects, a belief held dear by the early Pennsylvania Germans.

"When they needed dishes, they created redware and they made it pretty," she explains. "When they needed blankets, they created quilts and made them pretty, and they did the same with their documents. When I began creating fraktur, I didn't want to just copy it, and I didn't want to add cutesy things to it. I wanted to honor that heritage."

She goes to some length to accomplish just that. Her fraktur is drawn and painted on parchment-like paper, which she delicately ages for the appropriate effect. She confines her palette to five or six colors, using translucent watercolors instead of opaque gouaches and acrylics. "I layer the color, layer after layer, until I get the depth of color I want," she explains.

Although she may take words verbatim, she brings heartfelt creativity to the surrounding images. "I don't do strict reproductions because, to me, that's borrowing," she says. "Any talent that I bring to this is God-given. I feel I was meant to do fraktur, and it's the whole beauty of the art form, the creative expression, that drives me."

She strives hard to capture the mood of the original pieces, chuckling when she says, "My angels don't look as happy as the angels done by some

of the other fraktur artists I know, but they're based on the originals."

Urban builds many of her painted and grained frames herself and uses acid-free materials to achieve museum-quality preservation of her artwork. "I'm quite proud of my framing," she says. "And I'm very particular about the glass and the paper backing. Preservation is important to me because I look at these pieces of art as the antiques of tomorrow."

## SOURCES

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212-265-1040  
www.folkartmuseum.org  
Pennsylvania German fraktur, furniture, and pottery form the core of the collection of 400-plus objects donated by Ralph Esmerian, the museum's chairman of the board.

SCHWENKFELDER LIBRARY  
AND HERITAGE CENTER  
105 Seminary Street  
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215-679-3103  
www.schwenkfelder.com  
From June 26 to October 30, the museum is mounting the exhibition *Finding Susanna Heeber*. Funded in part by the NEA, it showcases much of the fraktur of Susanna Heebner (1750-1818) in the museum's permanent collection as well as fraktur by artists who influenced her.

Even without grinning angels, Urban's fraktur has steadily gained in esteem since 1987. Today, her creations are sold at the American Folk Art Museum in New York and several other gift shops, and her work currently is on display at the Mennonite Heritage Center in Harleysville, Pennsylvania, and the Westmoreland Museum of American Art in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. She's been featured in several national magazines and regional publications.

Prices for Marta Urban's fraktur begin at about \$65 for miniatures and \$125 for larger pieces and can reach about \$500, depending on size and complexity. ★

Ohio writer Greg LeFever is a contributing editor to *EAL*.

## FURTHER READING

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*Arts of the Pennsylvania Germans*, edited by Scott T. Swank (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1983)

*Fraktur: Folk Art and Family*, by Corinne P. Earnest and Russell D. Earnest (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publications, 1999)

*Fraktur Writings and Folk Art Drawings of the Schwenkfelder Library Collection*, by Dennis K. Moyer (Kutztown, PA: The Pennsylvania German Society, 1998)

*The Fraktur Writings or Illuminated Manuscripts of Pennsylvania*, by Donald A. Shelley (Allentown, PA: Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, 1961)

"Piety and Protocol in Folk Art: Pennsylvania German Fraktur Birth and Baptismal Certificates," by Frederick S. Weiser, in *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 8, 1973, pp. 19-44.